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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

At Christmas of 1948 or 1949, the Boss's steady hands at the Old Ranch came down with the flu, leaving myself and another young cowboy to feed the whole outfit.

In those days that meant making two runs a week, using a wagon and team to fill a scattering of small feed houses; the next steps were to ride horseback by those houses and feed the old cows lucky enough to be on hand before the rider galloped off the next stop.

My partner was desperately in love with a Mertzon school teacher who'd gone home for the holidays. The nights passed lonely enough without his constant lamenting over his absent lover.

The bunkhouse faced the Santa Fe railroad tracks some three-fourths of a mile away. Most every night, the engineer started pulling on his whistle a mile before he reached our crossing. At every pull of the whistle, the old hounds out back would howl so long and mournfully it would've broken the heart of a black jack dealer. And just before I'd doze off, this lovesick cowboy would say, "I sure do hope I can get off in time to meet her bus on New Year's day."

Maybe it was the sad sound of the train, or perhaps it was the lonesome cry of those two pot licking dogs; but

whatever it was, I broke down and told him I'd cover for him so he could meet his girl friend.

When the time came, he left at daylight to meet the afternoon bus in Mertzon. The next I saw of him was way in the night. I don't remember exactly how I put it, but I probably said something like "How'd it go, pal?"

I never have forgotten his reply; "The first thing she said when she got off the bus, was, 'I've made a New Year's resolution. I'm going to stop going out with cowboys.' And you know what, Monte, she kept her promise long enough for me to throw her bag in the back of my pickup."

About the time for my college classes to start, the flu epidemic ended. The school teacher kept her resolution. I heard in the spring she was engaged to marry a mail carrier over in San Angelo.